

LIGHT IN
DARK PLACES
BY NEWMAN SMYTH



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LIGHT IN DARK PLACES

A SPIRITUAL IMAGINATION

BY

NEWMAN SMYTH

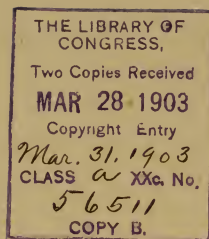


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LIGHT IN DARK PLACES.

THERE is a reasonable and gracious use of imagination to be made in aid of faith. A happy spiritual imagination may be sent as a good gift of God to us to brighten some dark day. A friend once said to me — an artist with a quick eye for lights and colors: “I was sitting in a gloomy room on the north side of a hotel, alone, far from home, and somewhat forlorn, when I noticed occasional flashings of sunlight through my window. Wondering how such beams could come in as if on purpose to brighten the room for me, I went to the window and looked up, and saw a flock of pigeons wheeling in the air, and occasionally reflecting from their wings into my window the sunshine in which they were circling.” Our spiritual imaginations may sometimes do for our hearts a similar service, catching on their wings and reflecting

beams of heavenly truth to brighten us as we sit and think. But if these imaginations are not to be mere fancies, if they are to prove really helpful and cheering, they will catch and reflect some universal truth, as those birds did the sunshine.

In the use of imagination in the spiritual realms there is a simple principle which we may trust; by it a genuine imagination is distinguished from a mere fancy. A fancy is only the fleeting image of our own thought or desire thrown out upon the world, as a picture flashed upon a screen; a genuine imagination will project beyond our knowledge some true line of life, which has been followed in part through our present experience up to the bounds of human knowledge. Very much as the dotted lines on a map may indicate where, through regions as yet untraversed, some way already begun may be carried further on into a country as yet unexplored; so our truest conceptions of our future life will be the imagined continuations of the ways of our present attainment, the completions of the

best and worthiest life already realized. We may look most happily into God's future for us and ours, along the familiar ways of our truest and dearest life and love.

The poets who are our trusted guides into "the heavenlies" have learned this law of the spiritual imagination, for they see common experiences glorified. When Dante in his journey through the celestial spheres approached the last ascent towards Paradise, as the night came on, while

" From the other side
A voice that sang did guide us,"

he saw before him a way that rose upright within the rock, a narrow, precipitous path, lying darkly in the shadows of the crags on either side. But as he looked up that gloomy path, "close pent on either side by shelving rock," he saw the stars shining with new lustre in the space of sky just visible above the pass.

" A little glimpse of sky was seen above ;
Yet by that little I beheld the stars,
In magnitude and lustre shining forth
With more than wonted glory."

When our life becomes like a path up a steep pass, shut in by dark crags and filled with the mountain's gloom, then some old, familiar truths, shining with more than wonted glory in the little glimpse of sky above, may be the welcome stars to give us hope and cheer. Though the night comes on, the awful pass will lose its terrors because of their shining through it.

A simple human trust in the best life of our hearts and homes, and its natural completion beyond, is the prophetic secret of the Spirit which those poets have known whose singing has for us the sweetness and the power of the larger hope. Recall, as an instance of this prophetic interpretation of our present life, the passage in Whittier's "Snowbound" which begins with the words:

"O Time and Change! — with hair as gray
As was my sire's that winter day,
How strange it seems, with so much gone
Of life and love, to still live on."

The memory of sorrow ends, as with a burst of sunshine, in these lines:

“ Alas for him who never sees
 The stars shine through his cypress-trees !
 Who, hopeless, lays his dead away,
 Nor looks to see the breaking day
 Across the mournful marbles play !
 Who hath not learned, in hours of faith,
 The truth to flesh and sense unknown,
 That Life is ever lord of Death,
 And Love can never lose its own.”

Imagination in this conclusion passes without break or violence from the seen to the unseen. Hope is but memory glorified. The last line is the natural continuation of the line just before it; the faith that “Life is ever lord of Death” has for its full completion the trust that “Love can never lose its own.” Only now we may say still more; the first truth of Life’s lordship over Death is not wholly unknown to flesh and sense; for our present knowledge of death, gained from scientific researches concerning its part and use in evolution, discloses to us the fact that it has always served Life, and has ministered to the enrichment, diversification, and advance of the kingdom of life; so that we may say it is a

truth half-known at least to flesh and sense that Death is always the servant, and Life is lord of all. Our further trust in Love's completion transcends, while it fulfills, this truth of life already revealed and realized.

This right use of the spiritual imagination will help us interpret some of the more tragic events of life. It may throw some gleams of light into darkest places. For there are some very dark places, some utterly strange experiences, through which occasionally human life must pass, which seem to be left unilluminated by the faiths which are sufficient for our reasonable assurance in the ordinary course of events. Some sudden shock, an untimely loss, a seeming waste, or an awful ending of a life will render faith itself speechless; we can then only stand still with hearts benumbed, and say with bated breath, It was God's will! Afterwards in quiet hours, when we may bear to think of such strange providences, we gain little light for their interpretation even from those truths which are sufficient usually to give us daily courage

for daily life. Thoughts which have light in them for such experiences will come to us, if at all, from the far borders of our knowledge. Gleams may at times break upon our spirits, which we fail to keep in our thoughts as a clear light of reason; evanescent imaginations they may be of things unseen, but for the moment they will light up the face of life's hard inevitableness, and after they have come and gone we find left with us a more serene assurance of some Diviner presence in the darkest places.

At times a familiar verse of the Bible may suddenly become luminous to us with a new meaning; a truth unseen before may shine forth from it with an immediate illumination, like a flashlight in a dark chamber; and that room will never afterwards seem to us so dark again. A single spiritual imagination, though it be evanescent, is happily to be prized, if it may serve to disillusion ever afterwards some dark passage of its fears.

There are some Scriptures which, if brought together, may show some purpose in these most

baffling and bewildering perplexities of faith; they may help us wait more quietly and trustfully for the full interpretation of the often strange shattering of human hopes and the frequent brokenness and sad incompleteness of our present life.

They are such Scriptures as these concerning the ministry of angels and saints and the continued ministry of the Son of man :

Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation?—*Heb.* 1 : 14.

And no man could learn the song save the hundred and forty and four thousand, even they that had been purchased out of the earth. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were purchased from among men, to be the firstfruits unto God and unto the Lamb. — *Rev.* 14 : 3-4.

I am a fellow-servant with thee and with thy brethren that hold the testimony of Jesus. — *Rev.* 19 : 10.

For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them that are tempted. — *Heb.* 2 : 18.

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial among you, which cometh upon you to prove you, as though a strange thing happened unto you : but inasmuch as ye are

partakers of Christ's sufferings, rejoice; that at the revelation of his glory also ye may rejoice with exceeding joy. 1 *Peter*, 4: 12-13.

Such Scriptures disclose the truth, which has become familiar to our Christian hope, that the future life is one of varied activities, where all may be ministering spirits. Perfect action, action without sense of fatigue because it is perfect, may be part and element of the rest of Heaven. But besides this general conception of all the saints and angels as ministering spirits, these Scriptures partly disclose another truth, which, if we let it light up our thoughts, particularly of some darker providences, may bring to us some special comfort and cheer. Through many Scriptures like these, there runs a strong, sure principle of true life, which, without break or violence, we may naturally imagine to be carried on into the world to come. It is the truth that life is all for service. Every life may have its own appointed service. This involves also the truth that each life may have its special training for its own service here and hereafter.

The help and mighty comfort of this truth may come to us as we imagine this law of service to be continued beyond this present world, and conceive of our life now as a training and seasoning for our individual ministries hereafter. Experiences otherwise hard to be understood, some strange events, and sorrows also most inexplicably sad, as well as the times and circumstances of some deaths, may have a gleam at least of God's blessed light thrown upon them, if we may conceive them to belong to His special training of some spirits for their special service among all the ministering spirits who shall follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. This truth of God's choice and training of souls here for rare service hereafter has in it many luminous suggestions ; largely imagined, it may surround, as with an atmosphere of light, some mysterious providences, which at times rise before us in their hard inevitableness, awful in their gloom.

This truth may have light in it for many in their sorrow for early or untimely death. How

often it happens that some dear child, perhaps the sweetest and most beautiful of children, is taken from the home because the Gardener needs that flower. In the "Life" of James Martineau we read of the great sorrow of his early married life, when a boy of rare promise, the light and beauty of his household, passed away. In the pathos of such unfinished life we say, How can God so will it! We must too often wonder why one so young and fair should die. But think of each life here as a beginning of some immortal ministry; think of each soul as fitted in its season here for its own personal ministry hereafter. For this is a thought from which a gleam of comfort may descend into our hearts when so bereft; it is thought of the fair service there may be for childhood throughout the immortal years; the service that may remain always for the children of the earth in the kingdom of heaven. They were suffered to live here just days enough of child-life to fit them for the special grace and happy ministry of childhood in the Father's house. They who have not lived

on through the lengthening years to lose the merry note of life's early innocence; they who lived just long enough to be glad; they whose voices have filled our homes with a gladsomeness all their own, — for what perpetual service may they be chosen and fitted, because God took them when they had just learned that bright note of childhood, and its joyous help for us, and made that in all the coming ages their special grace, their sweet, glad gift to all the angels. Too soon, we sometimes think, we lose that note and joyousness from our human homes. We wish that we could keep it, and that our children would not grow up so quickly. Perhaps God does keep it always in His eternal home and for the happiness of all the saints. They, indeed, shall grow in grace and heavenly wisdom, — these little ones from our own homes. Theirs shall be in the coming ages the wisdom of the angels of the Most High; but in all their future knowledge, their coming power and grace, the beauty of their youth shall remain upon them, and ever fresh in their hearts shall be the

gladness of a life on earth that was just long enough to have known how bright and full of laughter, sunshine, and glee a pure sweet child from God may be.

There is another strange providence, seemingly utterly unnatural, down into the mystery of which this thought of life here for service hereafter may throw an interpretative light. It is the strangeness of the waste of human power and the failure of possible careers of great usefulness, when men and women are ordered by some sudden providence from their posts of service here, while they are in their prime. We needed them. Their loss is one of the hardest things for us to understand. A man is just ready to do a man's work in the world, which has so great need of manly work, — and he is cut down in his strength. A woman has begun to fill some happy sphere with the radiance of her pure spirit, and she is gone from us. It seems as though some statue had been finished to fit perfectly its appointed niche, and the Sculptor who made it breaks it. This is an old

mystery of the unfinished life ; it is an ever new sorrow. We saw it but yesterday in an empty home ; and it is old also as the sculptured sepulchres of the ancients. One may see it — and the tears will come to the eyes as one looks upon the representation of it — in those cold marbles of the Greeks, on one of which, four hundred years before Christ, a sculptor had carved for a sepulchre the form of a young mother who had just given her new-born child to the nurse who bends weeping over her. It is also a memory fresh as the sorrow for the youth of rare promise in Tennyson's "In Memoriam."

In view of this seeming waste of Divine resources in the lives of men and women too soon cut short, this same luminous principle of life as a training for immortal ministry may not fail us ; here likewise we may imagine the possibilities of the service for which they have been called and chosen, and of the activities for which they were ready when they were sent on through death for their appointed service. Some choice work, for which they among all God's servants

are peculiarly qualified ; some task which they of all others may make their own, may be waiting for those who shall have lived long enough to become strong and noble, who have inherited the full promise of their manhood or womanhood ; — and then, in such command of their forces of mind and heart as they have gained here, and with their powers in their fresh unexhausted fulness, they have been quickly summoned hence to larger fields of service. If there be angels beholding the face of the Father in heaven, whose special task it be to guard little children here, among such happy ministering spirits may not she be best fitted for such service who has known on earth the first raptures of a mother's love ? And if God from all His wide domain would select from the hosts who fulfill His high behests some angels, like those whom St. John saw in his vision, to do His service, — who among them all might be more ready and eager to volunteer for such great action than they who had lived just long enough on earth to gain will and power, and aspiration for heroic

tasks? The special ministry of those who have entered in their manly strength and grace the world to come may be more than others as the ministry of the "strong angel" of the book of Revelation, holding, not a harp or lyre, but the trumpet, giving forth no uncertain sound.

We must stand at times before another experience which is the darkest of all, and the hardest for us to explain, for it appears to be a contradiction of all God's known methods of good will in a human life. It is that depth of mental darkness in which even a strong intellect will sometimes be lost, while at the end an awful death may lie in wait. There have been some reasonable souls, keeping for years their integrity, who at last were led through mental alienation to their end. A true, forceful man or woman, living a devoted life, known in many works of good will among men, clear in religious convictions, firm in character, unselfish in service, is overtaken by some seemingly preternatural darkness, and possibly called by God, who, we believe, will not forsake His servants, to enter alone an experience of

mental gloom and abandonment, the darkness of which no science of ours can explore, and where we, looking silently on, must gaze with reverent eyes, for it is a mystery of God.

What can we say before this strange act of the God whom we trust? Can we say more than Job said: "Though he slay me, yet will I wait for him"? Perhaps while we are waiting for Him, a gleam may fall over the face even of this hard mystery from these same Scriptures concerning the ministry of the angels and the saints. Here likewise we may find some needed aid for faith if we lay firm hold once more upon the sure principle that life and death may be one continued training for some more excellent ministry hereafter. Here too a sober and reverent spiritual imagination may follow this law of life's perfecting far on beyond what is seen, and conceive of all God's dealings with a soul as one good purpose and preparation for its future activity, possibly for some rare use and blessing in the ages to come.

This conception may gain clearer reality in

our thoughts, if we recall one instance in which through a temporary season of mental alienation and despair a soul was qualified for better service afterwards. We may then extend into futurity, and its possibilities of ministry, the truth which we may thus discover in God's method with a man during this present life.

We remember how the poet Cowper was left seemingly forsaken in an almost maniacal despair. When asked to prepare some hymns for the Olney collection he answered, "How can you ask of me such a service? I seem to myself to be banished to a remoteness from God's presence, in comparison with which the distance from East to West is vicinity, is cohesion." But in all our churches we are singing his hymns of gracious power and comfort:

"There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,"

"Sometimes a light surprises
The Christian while he sings."

"God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform."

Thousands of lost and hopeless souls have gained from Cowper, as from no other voice, the grace and peace of God. Did not his peculiar trial, the darkness of "the madness-cloud," belong, together with his "quick poetic senses," to the Divine method of his training that he might write our hymns of hope? Were not the depths of his abandonment a momentary part and portion, not too long continued, of the way in which God led him that He might set a chosen poet on the heights to sing of His light and mercy? Looking through that way in which Cowper had been led, but not forsaken, Mrs. Browning may know

"That earth's worst frenzies, marring hope, should mar not
hope's fruition,

And I, on Cowper's grave, should see his rapture in a
vision!"

If, then, within the confines of this present life we may learn so much as this of the Divine way of perfecting some soul for singular use; if we may observe how through its passing into clouds which erelong were scattered, a spirit

like Cowper's was rendered more sensitive to the glad light — how much more may it prove true hereafter that through peculiar trial, suffering, and seeming abandonment even in the ending of some lives, God may have finished His work of making some chosen souls perfect for such ministry as they only can render to the wandering, the outcast, the despairing, in all the universe where there may be the lost to be found, and where ministering spirits, who themselves have so suffered and have been so perfected, are sent to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation?

This thought is more than the comfortable relief which we may win from the reflection that to some who have passed through a troubled night there may come a glad awakening. They may awake to life eternal, as one who has had a feverish dream may awaken from his confused and fearful slumber, and the morning light will shine more brightly for him, and the singing of the birds will be sweet, and the great joy of the day shall be a new rapture because the night is

past and the dream is gone. So, we often think, may be the awakening of some troubled souls into God's blessed light, filled, like the morning's sunshine, with all melodious voices. But the truth which our wrestling with these Scriptures may win for our hope is more than this, more than the joy of the awakening,—it is the ennobling and glorifying truth of the continued ministry of a soul, called and chosen and well seasoned for its immortal service, its own and not another's, by its whole course and training in the tasks and trials of this life; by unselfish toil, by singular devotion, by constant love for others less fortunate, and also, it well may be, by some strange affliction or lonely passage through darkest places of life and death, prepared and perfected for its special and personal ministry in glory—even as He was made perfect through suffering, who was in all points tempted as we are, and who has obtained a ministry the more excellent.

This same hope of life for service may serve to light up many other experiences; each age,

and life ending at any season, may have its own call to ministry among the diversities of gifts in the kingdom of heaven. Everything in a human life may thus become in our eyes something sacred, useful, and gracious, as it is seen to belong to the Divine preparation and consecration of souls for their fitting place and part among all His ministering spirits.

One of the Scriptures, which we brought together, and which seem to light up one another, suggests quite directly this peculiar privilege of our earthly preparation for immortality. St. John heard a hundred and forty and four thousand singing before God's throne ; and they sing a new song ; and no man could learn their song. The reason why no others could learn their song is not far to seek. They had been purchased from the earth ; their song had been learned from their earthly life ; earth's sorrow becomes Heaven's song. It could have been learned in no other way. Their melody was their own. Other angelic spirits, pausing in their ministering flight to hear them sing,

might say to one another, "These are the earth-born, who have learned their own sweet note from their life in the world of the Cross; none of us can sing their song, as they follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth." Thus in the harmony of the praises and hallelujahs of the saints, which shall be as the voice of many waters, each soul, saved, purified, glorified, shall have its part, every life find its own voice, and heaven be richer for the earth that was.

We have not touched as yet upon one other aspect of this truth, which lies nearer to us, and on which our last thought may rest. There may be for us now a lesson to be learned of immortal fellowship from the sudden shocks, the special sorrows, the incomprehensible providences, which may enter our circles, or overtake our friends. These may be part, likewise, of our human training in the sympathies and the services of an immortal fellowship.

There is one word, which next to those words that denote the closest ties of the flesh and our dearest relationships, has a power and worth and

glory in it beyond others in our English tongue, — it is the word “comrade.” Perhaps only the soldier can have learned the full meaning and nobleness of that word “comrade.” Men who have stood shoulder to shoulder through the battle’s long, dark day; men who have not only leapt forward together in the brave charge through the flame of death, but who have returned and ventured their lives again to save some fellow-soldier who has fallen at the front; men who in the evening, after the rattle of the musketry has ceased, have gathered, the few of them who live, in their broken, rallied companies, to look again into one another’s faces; men who are ready to stand together another day of fierce battle, and perhaps of victory, — they can know, as no others may, what that word “comrade” means.

Our life here may make us comrades for immortality. We may be winning amid these earthly scenes, and especially from our fiery trials, a comradeship for the life beyond. Christians are now comrades in the hope of the everlasting life.

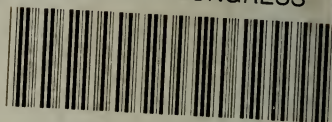
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